

Kitsap News

Ferries would ride benefits of gas tax

By Sun Staff
April 5, 2005

The state's ferry riders would get one more new boat and smaller fare increases if a transportation tax package proposed Monday by the Senate becomes law.

The package would raise \$14.5 billion over 16 years for transportation projects, including \$6.9 million from boosting the tax on gasoline by 15 cents per gallon.

Washington State Ferries, which already is preparing to build four 130-car boats to replace old ones, would be able to buy a fifth new one. It would take over for the Hyak, which serves the San Juan Islands and sometimes the Bremerton-Seattle route. The first four ferries, which will cost a combined \$284 million, are being funded by a nickel-per-gallon gas tax increase passed in 2003.

Ferry ticket prices have been increasing about 5 percent per year, a trend that was expected to continue. This year, however, the Tariff Policy Committee has recommended a 6 percent increase. The Senate proposal would adopt that increase, but follow it up with annual hikes of 2.5 percent instead of 5 percent.

The proposal also would pay for the passenger route between Vashon Island and Seattle for one more year and for grants to King County Metro to help operate it thereafter.

The mothballed fast ferries Chinook and Snohomish, which once ran between Bremerton and Seattle, would be sold and the proceeds placed in an account that could be accessed by transit agencies in need of capital funds to start passenger-only service.

Sen. Bob Oke, R-Port Orchard, said he'd prefer the state keep the boats and run them between Southworth and Seattle.

"Boy, it would be great to have that run from Southworth, and we could do it right now with those front-end loaders," he said. "It would be a great service, but I don't know if we'll get there again."

Oke doesn't support the Senate's gas-tax idea. He said he'd only accept it if it provided relief for toll bridges like the new one across the Tacoma Narrows.

Sen. Tim Sheldon, D-Potlatch, doesn't intend to vote for the budget, either.

"The whole package is about the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the 520 Bridge," he said. "There's not a lot in there for ferry projects." And there's not a lot in there for his constituents, he said.

"A big gas tax increase will hurt them individually and there's nothing in the budget that gets more jobs in Kitsap County," said Sheldon, noting that Kitsap and Mason counties rank one-two in time of commute. "There ought to be something in state government, in the general fund or the transportation budget, that encourages local jobs so we don't have to be the transportation problem in Pierce County and King County."

Sen. Phil Rockefeller, D-Bainbridge Island, said he appreciates the Senate trying to put the brakes on ferry fare increases and to pitch in \$130 million toward replacing the west end of the Hood Canal Bridge. The discovery of Indian artifacts at a pontoon construction site has left the project way behind schedule and far over budget.